

September 3 – Labor Day

Called to Follow Christ

Scripture: Acts 22:3-16

After Jesus, the person who has made the greatest impact on people of the Christian faith is Paul. Over half of the New Testament is made up of his writings or about his life. Down through the centuries his words have been used to shape everything from how our churches are structured, to what we believe about Christ's death and resurrection, to what are the core values of our faith. I remember a professor of New Testament telling us that we are more of a Pauline church than we are a Christian Church. He meant that while Jesus came and taught, it was Paul who framed what his life and words meant to us. Paul is not without his critics. Many feel that his rabbinical training caused him to gloss over the important messages of inclusion and love that were so essential to Jesus' teachings. Even in his day, John the Apostle, who is the other major contributor to what we call the New Testament, placed more emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit and the force of love than on right beliefs, as did Paul. There is no doubting his importance to our faith, yet we often are quite ignorant of his life.

Adam Hamilton wrote a study called "The Call." It talks about Paul, his conversion and subsequent missionary journeys. During my study leave, we will be examining his book and, more importantly, visit some of the sights that were important in Paul's life. Because of political upheaval in Turkey we do not get to visit what Paul knew as Asia Minor, where he spent the majority of his ministry, but instead will spend time in Malta, a place he visited on his final journey to Rome. We will see other Pauline sites, Athens and Naples and finally Rome, visiting the historic site of Paul's execution. Today I want to begin by sharing just a bit about Paul's life before his conversion.

His parents named him Saul, after the first king of Israel, who was from the tribe of Benjamin, the same tribe as Saul. Saul's parents lived in Tarsus, a major city in the eastern part of the Roman Empire. Tarsus had been granted by Caesar Augustus the special status of being a "free city." This meant that they were permitted to govern themselves, were allowed to mint their own coins, and were free from most Roman taxes. We later learn that Saul was a Roman Citizen by birth. This meant that his parents were quite wealthy and had purchased their citizenship, or they had received it

because of special service to Rome. From Roman records, we know that some years before Saul's birth, Rome had landed a large army near Tarsus in preparation for war with the Syrians. Trades people, like tentmakers, were hired to outfit the army and many were given citizenship as part payment for their work.

Tarsus was a thoroughly Greek city. Greek would have been spoken and was probably Saul's first language. It is likely Saul, whose Roman name was Paul, received instruction at the Greco-Roman primary and grammar schools of Tarsus up to the age of thirteen. In these schools Paul would have learned the art of writing, the use of language, he would have studied the Greek poets and the basics of Greek rhetoric and logic. Then his parents had the resources to send him to study in Jerusalem with the greatest Rabbi of the time, Gamaliel. He probably went around the age of 13 and studied with him until about the age of 20. He became a part of the Pharisaic movement and, when done with his education, would have been an apprentice rabbi or teacher.

It is likely that Saul was in Jerusalem the Passover when Jesus was arrested and crucified, but he never mentions having seen Jesus. What we do know is that soon after Jesus' death Saul became part of the official Sanhedrin group trying to stomp out this new sect. He was present at the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, and then was given letters of authority that he could take to Damascus, allowing him to arrest and bring back to Jerusalem for punishment any followers of Jesus that he could find. It was on this journey that he encounters the risen Lord in a blinding light and hears his call.

We will talk a bit more about what happens to Saul over the next fourteen years, the time between his conversion and the beginning of his first missionary journey, but for now I want us to focus on the people that were important in changing Saul. No one experiences conversion in a vacuum. No one responds to God's call alone. It is through the work of others and the support of others that we come to faith and grow in faith.

Think about the impact of Stephen's death on Saul. Saul was convinced that Jesus was a heretic. Yet Stephen asks God to bless and forgive those who are preparing to stone him. Only the most cold-hearted, unfeeling person, someone Saul was not, would not pause for a moment and ask, "What is it about the teaching of this carpenter that would cause someone to act this way?" All of us are called to witness to our faith. It will likely not be as dramatic as this. Yet, when we live our faith intentionally

and act in some unexpected ways, people notice. When we are willing to forgive, instead of seek revenge, they might ask why? When we give generously of our time or resources, instead of focusing on just what we want and need, they might wonder as well. Where is God calling you to be a Stephen and live courageously and faithfully so others might be challenged and, perhaps become open to what God wants them to do in their lives?

Saul is blinded in his encounter with Christ. He is led by the hand into Damascus where he spends three days in prayer. There was a believer in Damascus by the name of Ananias. My guess is that he and other followers of Christ were rejoicing that God had delivered them by striking Saul blind. This seemed like an answer to prayer. Then he hears, go find Saul and heal him. How would you have reacted if you were Ananias? He was asked to literally take his life in his hands and go heal this persecutor of the faith. I can only imagine his fears but even more his courage and trust in God. What is even more amazing is how he greets Saul. He calls him brother, a term of inclusion in the early church. He acted as if Saul was already a convert and a beloved part of their group! Imagine what it would have been like for Saul to hear those words. He had been in darkness, emotionally and spiritually for days. All of his religious convictions were being questioned. All of his ambitions as a member of the Pharisaic class were over. He had come to see the danger of combining convictions, religion, and ambition. It can create a toxic brew of fanaticism where you end up doing all the wrong things in firm belief you are acting for God, when in reality all you are doing is fueling your own selfish goals. He felt God calling him to go in a new direction and yet being blind in that time meant a life of poverty and begging. He, I am sure, was wondering what did it all mean. God had impacted him mightily. He felt God wanted him to embrace this new faith. Yet here he was in darkness, no one of that group willing to come near him. Talk about a despairing time. Then he hears the words, "Brother Saul." It would have been light in the darkness. Ananias places his hands on him, his sight is restored and he begins to proclaim the good news. He does so with such effect that after a few days he has to leave Damascus at night, being lowered over the city wall in a basket to escape. Ananias was willing to take a risk, to believe someone could change. Where is God

asking you to risk and be willing to reach out to someone in hopes that God is doing something new in their lives.

Next week we will talk about Paul's first missionary journey. When we do, we will look at the impact of Barnabas on his life. Between the time of his conversion and being sent forth from the Antioch church is a time estimated to be as long as fourteen years. Now it wasn't a time of inactivity. He met with some in Jerusalem, including Peter. We hear about him preaching in the area around Tarsus. When you think about what he had heard from Jesus to be his call, and the living out of that call, the time between could have been very frustrating. Saul might have felt that he was spinning his wheels. Yet this was probably a very important time as he learned more about Jesus, began to understand his own reactions to the good news, and began to realize the implication for what this meant for all.

We all have those in between times. How do you handle them? Do you get frustrated because it feels like inaction? Or, do you throw yourself into the opportunities that present themselves, believing that through them God is preparing you for the next step in your faith journey.

We talked about a couple of people who mightily impacted young Saul. Who are the people in your life who have influenced your faith? Have you recently given thanks to God for what they have done for you? If they are still living, have you ever thanked them? Where is God calling you to live your life of faith in such a way that it might make a significant difference in another's faith journey?

Where is God calling you to follow God in new ways even if it means giving up some of your preconceptions? What are the first steps you need to take?

Finally, if this is an in between time, how are you living faithfully today? How are you living, not looking back wishing things were like they use to be, or frustrated that something new hasn't revealed itself, but faithfully living today trusting that what you do and learn will make a difference in tomorrow's journey of faithfulness. This is what it means to follow Christ.